NYPost 5/15/75?

The Literary Scene

By ROBERT SHERRILL

THE PERMANENT WAR ECONOMY: American Capitalism in Decline. By Seymour Melman. Simon & Schuster. 384 pp. $9.95.
ARMING AMERICA: How the U.S. Buys Weapons. By J. Ronald Fox. Harvard. 484 pp. $15.

When Seymour Melman came out with his "Pentagon Capitalism: The Political Economy of War" in 1970, Vietnam was still depressing us and his demon theory of the Pentagon—that there is an intrinsic evil in military spending—wasn't too hard to believe.

But now that we have the opportunity to take a more dispassionate study of the Pentagon, there doesn't seem to be much point in Melman's handing us almost the same sermon again, especially when it cost one dollar more than it did last time and is about 67 per cent less coherent.

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Having no war to inveigh against, he seeks to catch our attention by berating less likely villains, or by flogging the old villains in an excessive fashion.

Most sane people would probably agree with him that the military budget (though it has grown at a much slower pace than the civilian budget) prevents our tending to our domestic needs as we should. We don't need another book to tell us that.

We need instruction on how to get rid of the volunteer Army's monstrous payroll. We need advice on how to force the military brass and their cronies in the industry to accept the simple edict of former Assistant Defense Secretary David Packard: "The only sensible course is to hold the contractor to his contract." Why can't it be done? What's wrong with the internal mechanism? Melman gives us no answers. J. Ronald Fox does.

Every year the U.S. spends more than $30 billion to buy new weapons. Nobody knows just how much the bill is, just as nobody knows anything else for sure about the Pentagon.

Except for a couple of defects—one only an irritant, the other fatal—Fox does a fine job. As well he might. For seven years he served the Pentagon. During most of Nixon's first term he was assistant secretary of the Army, responsible for Army procurement.

Virtually all major weapons systems cost twice what the Pentagon and its contractors promise, and most of the systems don't even come close to expectations. Of 11 major weapons systems developed during the '60s, six performed at 25 per cent, or less, of specifications set for them.

By law civilians control the Army and Navy, but in fact the military out-fox their civilian masters simply by withholding information from them, giving them false information, or frightening them into accepting bad guesses.

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"Arming America" is a very satisfying book for a number of reasons, the chief one, perhaps, being that its harshest judgments come from a man who wants to help his government straighten out the most troublesome and embarrassing part of the budget.

Consequently, I should warn you, some of the book contains charts and bureaucratic jargon that will make the layman's eyelids droop. Never mind, it's worth wading through this to get at the rest.

Robert Sherrill is the author of "Military Justice Is to Justice as Military Music Is to Music" and "The Saturday Night Special."

The Washington Post Book World